

# LSJ

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## ABSOLUTELY (F)LAWLESS

HOW FIVE LAW GRADUATES TURNED THEIR  
DEGREES INTO NON-LEGAL SUCCESS STORIES

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# What the law taught me

For many lawyers and law graduates, a career in the law will not be their final destination. Five Australians who are shining in careers outside the legal profession share the value of legal education and experience to any field.

BY KATE ALLMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON McCORMACK



ADAM LIAW introduced his charming grin and iconic man bun to Australian TV audiences in 2010, when he auditioned for the second series of *MasterChef Australia*. At the time, Liaw was employed as a lawyer for Disney in Tokyo and intended to return to the law after he spent his holiday leave auditioning for *MasterChef* in Sydney. That was before he won. The final episode in which Liaw took the 2010 *MasterChef* crown remains the highest-rating non-sport TV event in Australian history. Liaw, 38, has since published five cookbooks, writes regular columns for *GoodFood*, *Sunday Life* and *The Guardian*, and presents the SBS food travel program *Destination Flavour*, which won the 2016 AACTA Award for Best Lifestyle Television Program. In a rare still moment away from the cameras, Liaw reflects on what he misses about the law.

## THE CHEF

"My dad is Chinese-Malaysian, born in Malaysia, and my mum is English, born in Singapore. I was born in Malaysia and we moved to Adelaide when I was very young. My parents decided that Australia was home early on. We'd have a roast on a Sunday, spaghetti bolognese during the week. I played cricket and did all those typical Aussie things."

We had a big family which grew to eight kids when my mum remarried, so everyone had to chip in and help around the house. One of the things we did was each kid would cook dinner once a month. With eight kids, that gave mum one week off from cooking each month.

I had thought I would study medicine post-graduate because my parents and siblings were all doctors and I guess my parents saw medicine as a good profession that offered financial security. To me, medicine was very clinical and scientific. Law seemed so much more interesting because you were always working with people, and to resolve problems between two people or companies.

I started my first job at Finlaysons in Adelaide when South Australia was privatising its electricity industry. It was a year of brutal due diligence, going through millions of documents about the companies that were bidding to take over the electricity stations. My team was pulling huge hours, literally sleeping under the desks for weeks on end. I learnt how to work very, very hard.

I moved to Japan to work in-house for Disney in about 2004. In those days, the way we used the internet was just developing, and working in digital media in Asia for a Californian company really felt like the frontier of the legal world for intellectual property. Outside of work, food became my closest connection to Japanese culture. I would go out to *izakayas* (casual Japanese restaurants) and go through menus trying different foods, often not knowing what I was eating. I learnt Japanese by reading menus and talking to people. Socialising revolved around food.

I also spent a lot of relaxing Sundays buying Japanese cookbooks and cooking from them. My friends said, 'You should apply for *MasterChef*, you're a really good cook'. Jetstar had just started flying to Japan, so I thought I'd jump on a \$500 flight to Sydney to see all my friends and audition while I was there. I completely intended to go back to my job as a lawyer after that.

I think people made a bigger deal out of it than it was for me. It wasn't like I dramatically threw my tie out the window and said, 'That's it, I leave the legal world behind!' I really thought I would go back to law and be a lawyer within three months. The idea that I could make as good a living as not-even-a-proper-chef chef was just madness to me. But later, I actually found I really enjoyed what I was doing.

Every lawyer at every desk in every city around the world loves to write and dreams of leaving their job to write a book. I was able to do that. People know me because I'm on TV but my job is as a writer. I write TV shows, I write books, I write columns.

What do I miss about the law? I miss people. These days I spend a lot of time on the phone, in my office, on planes and in hotel rooms alone, away from my wife and two young children. The person I work most closely with is my manager, Melita Hodge, and we speak on the phone every day but I see her maybe every two months. I found the law very collegial and I made a lot of good friends while working in firms and in-house.

Whether it's cooking or drafting contracts or cleaning toilets, at work you have a particular task to do. You just have to find the best and most efficient way of doing it. Law, more than other professions, teaches you to solve those problems and gives you the capacity to do so under pressure. I think those skills translated in *MasterChef*. ■

**MICHAELA WHITBOURN** is the Legal Affairs and Investigative Reporter at *The Sydney Morning Herald*. On weekdays, you will see her camped outside Sydney courtrooms tapping out a story on her laptop. Whitbourn studied arts and law at Sydney University and began her professional career as a graduate lawyer at King & Wood Mallesons in 2009. Outside the office she wrote for online legal journals *Justinian* and *The Gazette of Law and Journalism*, where Walkley Award-winning journalist Richard Ackland encouraged Whitbourn to develop her trademark "spiky", sardonic reporting style. In 2010, she gave up her top-tier legal job (and much of her salary) to pursue a cadetship at *The Australian Financial Review*. Whitbourn, 32, explains how her legal experience helped make her a better journalist.

## THE JOURNALIST

"I've always been a really big reader. As a child, I loved reading books, loved reading the newspaper. My mum worked in libraries and she used to bring home truckloads of books for me. I remember being totally obsessed with *Anne of Green Gables*. I'd just read it over and over and over."

I grew up in north-west Sydney and went to school at Monte Sant' Angelo in North Sydney. I had a really good English teacher and I came first in extension English because I was an uber nerd and ruthlessly competitive. If I thought I could win something, I'd go for it. It was a bit silly. I think I've mellowed since then.

I always thought I would end up being a journalist, but I didn't really know how to go about it. *The Sydney Morning Herald* wasn't offering cadetships when I started looking for graduate jobs in 2007. So, initially I went to the College of Law and did my practical legal training at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

I worked as tipstaff for Judge Joseph Campbell in the NSW Court of Appeal for a year after graduating. It was kind of like being back stage in a theatre, seeing it from behind the scenes.

I loved the theatricality of the barristers. I also spent pretty much the whole year hung up on really minor details that just did not matter.

For example, you know how the tippy knocks three times on the door to signal that the judge is going to come in? I'd be there holding this gilt-tipped staff and wearing a Harry Potter-style coat and I'd be thinking, 'How on earth am I going to pull out the judge's chair and hold this staff thing at the same time? Am I going to hit the judge on the head with the staff?' When it came to actually doing it, I was fine. I tended to over-analyse the minor details.

My first year as a graduate at Mallesons was really good. I didn't know what to expect and I'd heard a lot about how the hours at big firms were pretty shocking and it

would be tough going. But that wasn't my experience at all. Everyone was really nice and most of them were nerds like me, so I felt at home.

I remember a partner called me one night when I was in a taxi on the way home. It was 10.30pm or 11pm and I thought, 'Oh no, I've stuffed something up and will have to go back to the office'. But he just said, 'Thank you for doing that. Great work'. That kind of stuff helps a lot because you feel like you're actually important and you're not a robot. I felt like I mattered.

It wasn't like I hated the law and wanted to leave; it was just that I really wanted to write. My cadetship at *The Financial Review* was kind of a baptism by fire. Very quickly I was writing at least one story a day.

I remember wondering if I would ever be fast enough to hammer out multiple stories a day. It just seemed impossible to me. Within a year I became quicker.

I learned to start juggling. You make a phone call for one story, make a call for another one, start writing them both. I'm kind of addicted to it now, with online publishing and the 24/7 news cycle. If I file a story and it's not online a few minutes later I think, 'What is going on here?'

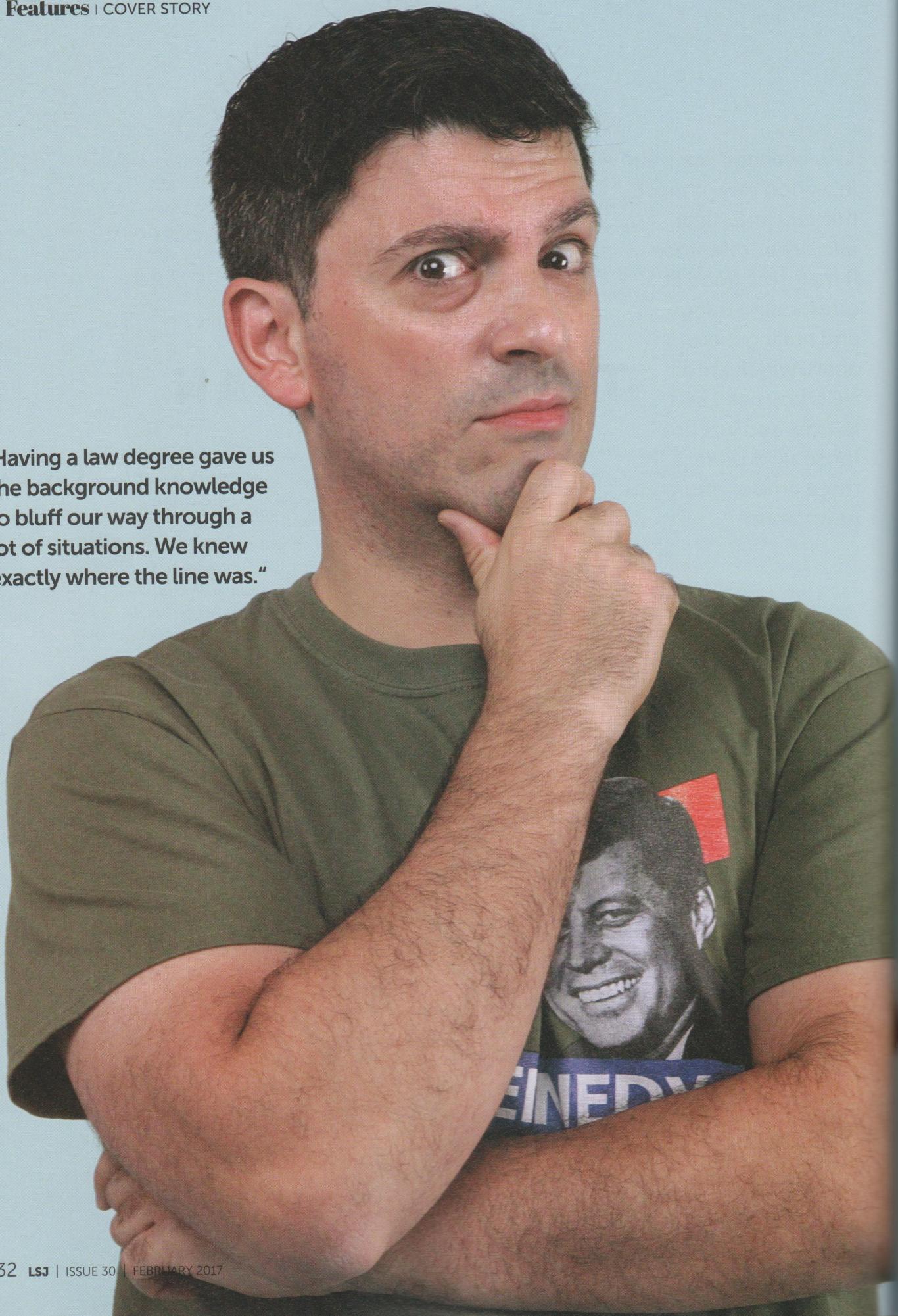
Doing law required using a different part of my brain, and I still like using that part of my brain. I sometimes miss it. You get a lot more depth and you write things straight. There is a kind of freedom in writing things straight because it requires effort to write something really tightly and in an entertaining way.

Law changed my brain in a good way. It made me very analytical and detail-oriented. It made me good at questioning things and pulling them apart and synthesising information, which are all skills you need as a journo. You just use those skills under a lot more time pressure in a newsroom." ■

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**CHARLES "CHAS" LICCIARDELLO**, 39, is a comedian, television producer and member of satirical team The Chaser. Licciardello is known for writing and producing a number of ABC comedy programs, including *The Chaser's War on Everything*, *CNNNN* and *Planet America*. However, few people realise that his resume also lists a law degree from Sydney University. In fact, four of The Chaser members met at law school and first tried their hand at writing comedy for the annual law and arts revues. Licciardello, who is now married with two children, says a legal education helped his team to pull off their infamous stunts, including when they infiltrated the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Sydney in 2007 with a fake motorcade and Licciardello dressed as Osama Bin Laden.

## THE COMEDIAN

"I grew up in Maroubra in a lower-middle class family and I was a bit of a troublesome kid at school. I wasn't a mean kid. Let's just say my discipline was poor. I remember sticking a wedge in the water bubbler so when other kids turned it on the water would spray in their faces. When I was sent to the principal, I couldn't help but laugh because I found the whole thing ridiculous and farcical."

Psychologists said I was on the spectrum of Asperger's disorder. I was very academic. I was very interested in maths and science and I had a good memory, so I tended to do well in exams. Ironically, English was my best subject in the Higher School Certificate. I saw English as another form of maths, like a formula with an equation. I would recognise patterns and then apply them. It's the same with writing comedy.

I chose to study science and law at university because it gave me five years to practise writing comedy. I figured that if I was no good at the end of that, I would have two backups to become either a science teacher or journalist. My theory was that if I rocked up to *The Sydney Morning Herald* and asked for a job, the law degree might put me ahead of the arts candidates.

I'll admit I didn't attend many classes at university because I spent most of my time writing comedy for the law revue and playing ping pong in the faculty common room. However, I do remember the most valuable skill I learnt during my entire education was at law school. At the time, there was a real movement towards writing essays in plain English. My lecturers drilled it into me to express thoughts in a clear and succinct way. This is a great skill for law or journalism and it's even better for comedy. Because in comedy you strip it back, strip it back, strip it back.

There were a few ways our law degrees helped us when we were making *The Chaser's War On Everything*. The first was arguing with the ABC, because the ABC's lawyers tended

to be quite conservative. If we had no idea about the law we would have had to just take their word for it. But because we did, we were able to argue each case.

Second, having a law degree gave us the background knowledge to bluff our way through a lot of situations. A classic example is when we'd turn up in someone's office and start filming them and being pricks. A lot of people, including almost every lawyer in the world, would say that's trespass. Especially when the person tells you to get out. But we knew exactly where the line was. We would immediately walk out when asked, while continuing our stunt and walking backwards and filming.

So many of our stunts involved hidden cameras and hidden microphones. We pushed the *Listening Devices Act* as far as it could go. Recording a private conversation without the other person knowing is against the law. But what's a private conversation? I would approach someone and do a stunt with a hidden camera but we'd have a runner standing two metres away in the background. So we could argue, 'It's public – there's a person standing right there!'

One of the little-known things about the APEC stunt is that our legal team suggested the idea. We had a bunch of ideas but the security expert said none of them were going to work. He said, 'You can probably get through on a motorcade because they're just going to wave you through'. If you watch the APEC stunt you can see that we got through and we stopped. The reason we stopped was because the legal team specifically told us there was a zone we could not go into or we would go to jail. When the judge watched the original footage play back in court, we were found not guilty because it was so clear that we were trying not to break the law. We were never overtly breaking the law, but we were bending it as far as we possibly could. Without our legal training we would not have been able to make the show." ■

**LAURA CHONG** is the founder and sole director of 400 Co, an online store with a storefront in Brisbane selling corporate clothing for women. Chong, 30, studied law at the University of Queensland and worked as a lawyer in the construction litigation team at Holding Redlich in Brisbane after she graduated in 2012. A fashion-conscious litigator with limited time to shop, Chong grew tired of the few labels that catered to corporate women. In 2013, she started designing and selling her own clothing for 400 Co. In 2015, Chong quit her job in the law to focus on the business, which now employs five staff. She says her experience in a fast-paced legal career sparked her drive to push boundaries in both design and business.

## THE FASHION DESIGNER

"I was born and raised in Melbourne, before my family moved to the Sunshine Coast when I was in high school. When I was very young, my mum taught me to sew because she used to make all her own clothes when she was a kid.

The first pair of pants I made I sewed the legs together. There was a lot of trial and error.

I always had a bit of a creative side. I guess it sort of runs in my family because my grandad was a tailor and my dad made tents as a hobby.

I remember once I made this A-line skirt out of a yellow print towel. I put a zip into it and I would wear it to the beach and put it on after a swim to dry off. I'm not sure I'd wear it now but as a kid I thought it was awesome.

I'm a big fan of functional fashion. When I was a girl, I had a dress that could double as a skirt and, weirdly, now at 400 Co we have wrap dress that can double as a skirt. It's one piece four ways – a dress that can be turned inside out or folded down to wear either side as a skirt. I'm always thinking about how to get the most out of my wardrobe.

During high school I was naturally academic but I'm not going to lie, I was quite social. I had the grades, so I went to study law at the University of Queensland. It was not until my fifth year when I got a job as a law clerk at Holding Redlich that I realised I loved the work.

In construction litigation, as with most litigation, everything is due yesterday. You're super under the pump and trying to keep everything afloat. Sometimes you have five business days to turn around a multi-million dollar claim. I managed 20 to 25 files.

It was definitely not a nine-to-five gig. I remember some nights staying at work until 1am and then coming home and working on 400 Co until 3am or 4am and then going to bed and doing it all again the next day.

Weirdly, I couldn't come home and just go to bed. I always had this rule that every day you have to be progressing and taking a step that helps take you towards your goal.

I started 400 Co because I needed to express myself creatively. Even if you're working around the clock, if you do nothing outside of work it can become really depressing.

I also got so bored with the work clothing options out there for women. I, like everyone else, would buy the usual Cue and Portmans pieces and maybe throw in a couple of designer labels every now and then. I remember I bought this black and white dress from Cue that I ended up returning because I realised that everyone else in the office owned it, too. I thought, 'There's got to be more than this'.

In law there's sort of a culture that you shouldn't ask stupid questions without trying to figure the answer out first. That's what I did when I was starting 400 Co.

I did some research and I looked up different web designers, what they offered, how hosting worked. I had a friend who did photography so we set up a little studio and took photos of my friends who were models. My former boss actually modelled for us – such a trooper. When the website went live, she was a little concerned you could zoom over her backside.

I remember a partner I used to work for at Holding Redlich would ask me the same question every time I saw him. He'd say, 'Laura, where do you get your drive?' I don't really know.

All I know is, every day you have to want to take a step in a direction. Do something every day that takes you a little bit closer to where you want to be. That's all I've done." ■

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**"Law has helped me in everything I've done. It's a wonderful degree that primes you for any career, because it teaches you reasoning skills and to use language properly and interpret arguments."**



**CATHERINE "CATE" MCGREGOR** was Australia's most senior ranking transgender military officer until she retired from her position as Group Captain in the Royal Australian Air Force in 2016. McGregor, formerly Malcolm until her gender switch in 2012, was the speech writer to every Chief of the Army from 2001 to 2014 and is well known for writing General David Morrison's viral video response to the "Jedi Council" sex ring scandal in 2013. McGregor also worked as Bob Carr's Chief of Staff and advised John Howard's Federal Liberal Party in the 1990s. More recently, she has rekindled her love for cricket by writing commentary for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Australian*. However, between her many high-profile careers McGregor spent four years working as a law clerk in Canberra and Sydney firms. McGregor, 60, reflects on her love for legal argument and why she regards law as the all-rounders' degree.

## THE ALL-ROUNDER

"I grew up in a war family in Toowoomba, Queensland. Dad had fought in the Kokoda campaign of World War Two and my grandfather was a colonel on the Western Front in World War One. My mother was a teacher. She encouraged me to read books, so I started reading encyclopaedias from volume one through to 20. For a 10 year old, it was kind of bonkers. I was extremely academic."

My interests were in humanities, which I guess predisposed me towards the law. Although I topped the class in English and history, I was in the bottom third of the class in maths and science. I often wondered if I had female brain wiring because most girls at school weren't very good at those subjects either.

I remember the cricket always being on the radio at home. It would be crackling around the house and Dad would even walk around holding an old transistor to his ear to listen to it when we were on holidays. I got hooked on it during the summer of 1962-63, when England toured Australia with Ted Dexter as captain.

I started to play with my mates in the backyard. One afternoon my old man came outside to watch and said to my mum, 'You know what? The kid can bowl!' He thought I would play for Australia one day.

I played for a number of state cricket teams throughout my school years and at 17 I was captain of the First XI at my high school, St Mary's College in Toowoomba.

To cut a long story short, my old man died of a brain tumour in 1964. He was 42. Mum had promised Dad I would get a university degree and the army had offered to pay for it with a scholarship to Duntroon Military College in Canberra. So I put cricket on the backburner and went to Duntroon to study a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in history.

After I graduated I was offered a job as an articled clerk in a law firm, back in the days when you could do that without a law degree.

In those days, to become a lawyer you just sat the Solicitors Admission Board exams and a master solicitor certified you. It was pretty much like working as an apprentice carpenter. Clerks even had right of appearance in court if the judge allowed it.

I got a job at McClellands, which was a major industrial firm for the NSW Labor Party. We were so busy, literally settling eight to 10 cases a day of compensation law. We would brief out a lot of matters to barristers but often the barrister would say, 'I'm jammed, I've got a matter running up here so you're going to have to take it.' I did cross-examinations and took people through evidence. I learnt a lot, very quickly.

I worked there from 1983 until 1986, when I started to drink too much. I was diagnosed as transgender in 1985 and at that stage I hadn't told anyone. I headed off and got a job in politics as Bob Carr's Chief of Staff, but I never got the law out of my system.

In 1999, I went back and enrolled as a mature-age student at Macquarie University in Sydney. It was an itch I hadn't scratched and I loved constitutional law, I loved jurisprudence.

I was a bit of a geek. Lecturers would say, 'Only read this part of the case', and I would get sucked in to the reasoning and want to read the entire judgment. In 2000, I started working at Sparke Helmore in Sydney and I worked there until September 11, 2001. That's when I re-enlisted in the military. The rest is history.

Law has helped me in everything I've done. Even having this conversation, you can see the animation that law sparks in me. I really do love it. It's a wonderful degree that primes you for any career, because it teaches you reasoning skills and to use language properly and interpret arguments. I continue to use those skills every day." ■